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Boland Is Center Stage, Like It or Not

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WASHINGTON — As President Reagan was walking down the center aisle of the House Wednesday night, Representative Dan Rostenkowski threw his arm around Representative Edward P. Boland and, catching the President's eye, pointed playfully at the Massachusetts Democrat. Mr. Boland squirmed uncomfortably at all the attention as his colleagues laughed.

That moment may have summed up the career of Mr. Boland, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee since it was created five years ago. In more than 30 years on Capitol Hill, he has shunned publicity with the same vigor that most lawmakers search for it, but the rising Congressional clamor over Administration policy in Central America has thrust Mr. Boland into the national spotlight.

He was the author of an ambiguous amendment adopted last year barring the use of United States aid to "overthrow" the government of Nicaragua. On Tuesday, his committee is scheduled to consider a tougher rider, co-authored by Mr. Boland, intended to end all covert American operations aimed at the Nicaraguan regime. Mr. Boland, who predicts that his panel will approve the ban, notes that he is so uneasy in this new role that he has trouble sleeping these days, and he asked colleagues if the new amendment could be named after someone else.

"Who the hell knows me in San Francisco or New York?" said Mr. Boland, who is a vigorous 72 and works out daily in the House gym. "I would prefer to remain anonymous. This kind of thing gives me visibility I don't cherish and I don't seek." This penchant for the shadows is not just a personal quirk, Mr. Boland says, but a necessity for a man who reads classified reports daily and heads a committee that helps oversee the nation's secret intelligence operations.

"In this committee," the chairman noted, "we don't brag about our successes, but we sure as hell hear about our failures." If intelligence matters require discretion, Mr. Boland believes, they also require bipartisan cooperation, and one of his favorite words is "consensus." This respect for differing opinions was demonstrated on Thursday, when the chairman agreed to put off a vote on his amendment because Republicans protested that it was being rammed through with insuffi-

cient notice. Also a seasoned politician, Mr. Boland worried that hasty action could make his committee, and his party, "look bad."

But in his search for consensus, Mr. Boland is pulled in two directions. As intelligence issues have entered the political arena, the committee has inevitably become more partisan. Representative C. W. "Bill" Young, Republican of Florida, says he often has "very strong differences" with Mr. Boland's handling of the committee, and accuses him of taking a "one-sided" view on some issues that are too critical of the Federal Government. Younger Democrats sometimes find the chairman too supportive of the Administration. Like many of his generation, Mr. Boland was shaped by the experiences of World War II, and he approaches his job with a keen sympathy for the value of intelligence operations.

Mr. Boland was also one of the main sponsors of the bill that established the Intelligence Committee, because he was concerned that earlier arrangements, which gave several panels jurisdiction over secret matters, led to what he regarded as serious leaks. And he was hand-picked for the chairmanship by House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., who shared an apartment with Mr. Boland during their early years in the House and still shares his generational perspective.

A Willingness to Cooperate

"Eddie Boland tends to be of the old school," said one liberal Democrat from the Northeast. "He sees his role as being supportive of the Administration, and he gives a strong benefit of the doubt to the Administration. He's less skeptical than some others, and that's why he was chosen to be chairman. Eddie reflects how things used to be, before the turmoil surrounding the Central Intelligence Agency about abuses in the past."

Asked about this comment, the chairman replied heatedly, "Boland is not of the old school." But he acknowledged the differences between himself and some of the younger members. "I think there's more of a willingness and a desire to cooperate on my part and get along with different Administrations," he said. "I think there's a responsibility on the part of the chairman to cooperate with any Administration that's in."

Interestingly enough, junior members of the committee were the first ones to insist that the Boland Amendment was being violated. The chairman agreed with their judgment only reluctantly, and even now says that he is able to see arguments on "both sides."

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